

# Samba Rock Culture in São Paulo: Beyond the Dance

by KRISTA KATENEVA

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THE DAYS leading up to November 8, 2012, were seemingly quiet yet busy in the corridors of Sid Richardson Hall on the UT Austin campus. Over the course of several afternoons, a small staff-and-student team was lining up foam boards, measuring out space, cutting tape, and hanging

a collection of thirty-two large photographs on the walls outside the third floor seminar room. The exhibit portrayed the samba rock culture of São Paulo, Brazil—a multifaceted dance and music tradition of global roots and a vibrant local scene in and around São Paulo's metropolitan area.

The exhibit, which ran November 8–December 7, was, in fact, the culmination of a larger event organized by a group of UT graduate students to honor the month of November, celebrated in Brazil as Black Consciousness Month. On November 8, a scholarly symposium was held titled *Spaces of Black Performativity in São Paulo*. The audience of approximately fifty students, staff, and faculty members attended a session of four research presentations by UT scholars working in the region. Both the exhibit and the symposium were sponsored by the Brazil Center of LLILAS.

Through its choice of topic, the symposium aimed to bring some scholarly focus back on São Paulo. In the case of Brazilian area studies, scholars often consider São Paulo when investigating policy and economic issues, but frequently prioritize the Rio-Bahia axis when tracing artistic and cultural practices. As a result, many have come to believe mistakenly that Brazilian regions outside this axis have relatively little to offer in terms of their cultural riches. Furthermore, as the state of Bahia is home to the largest African descent population in Brazil, it is often treated as the representative case study for the entire Afro-Brazilian culturescape, displacing the experience of black populations in other regions.

During the symposium, the four scholars challenged these tendencies as they presented their own research on cultural practices and Afro-Brazilian performativities (the capacity of speech and gestures to perform an identity) in São Paulo. UT graduate student and PhD candidate in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Eliseo Jacob explored the poetry and worldview of Sacolinha, a poet and writer from São Paulo's peripheral literary movement. Silvia Lorenzo, also a PhD candidate in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, focused on the work of Cooperifa—a literary cooperative on the southern edge of São Paulo. Jaime Alves, a recent PhD from the Department of Anthropology, provided the audience with a broader backdrop on racial violence and spaces for black political practice



in São Paulo. And last, the author, a PhD candidate at the Butler School of Music, introduced the exhibition itself, providing a historical background to the development of samba rock culture in Brazil. The symposium was then followed by a small reception and official opening of the photo exhibit.

### What Is Samba Rock?

For a better understanding of the symposium and the exhibit, an explanation of samba rock is helpful. Most participants in the scene identify the informal dance parties on the black *periferia*, or urban outskirts, of São Paulo as the birthplace of samba rock. In the 1960s, when North American rock and roll had become very popular in Brazil, many youth incorporated this young and exciting genre into their own dance and music practices, combining the steps with some local dances, and producing a new dance known as *soltinho*. At many parties, the rock-and-roll records were played alongside Brazil's own samba, and the *soltinho* step, rhythmically compatible with both, borrowed from the names of each in order to grow eventually into a new local genre of samba rock. On weekends, families living on the urban periphery would push their living room furniture into the corners, bring out the record player, and invite all their friends over, many carrying a record or two to be played during the night. The mixture of local and global sounds at these parties became the space in which samba rock refined its style and physical aesthetics.

Although initially just a dance step, the accompanying combination of sounds catalyzed the emergence of a generation of local musicians who also borrowed from each of the contributing genres

to produce the new musical repertoire of samba rock. In its audio version, the territory of samba rock extends far beyond the simplistic formula of samba + rock, borrowing traits and elements from rhythm and blues, soul, funk, jazz, and many other genres that contain the right groove or emotional charge for the mix. A more traditional soundtrack for a samba rock dance might, for example, include recordings by Bebeto, Jorgen Ben, Erasmo Carlos, Trio Mocotó, and Os Originais do Samba, but also by Ray Charles, Trini Lopez, Jimmy Smith, and George Benson. Currently, more recent groups like Clube do Balanço, Sandália de Prata, Farufyno, and Os Opalas cultivate a new composite style under the genre label of samba rock.

For many decades, samba rock led a rather informal life, occupying the marginalized territories of black urban outskirts, in homes and at neighborhood dance parties. The mainstream media and broader public consciousness did not formally recognize the scene's existence. Yet, its fundamental role in local black experience becomes apparent when one realizes that almost any individual born and raised on São Paulo's urban outskirts (drastically different from North American suburbs) has a personal relationship and experience with the samba rock culture. While the occasional official chronicles brush it off as a temporary expression of youthful fascination with "Americanization," personal archives and documents of the scene's participants reveal the existence of dance parties with attendance in excess of 16,000 participants.

Many of today's black youth in São Paulo grew up with their parents, aunts, and uncles dancing samba rock and passing the skill on to their children. Although seen by some as the tradition



Visitors view exhibition photos at LLILAS.

of the older generation, the scene has been reinvigorated since 2000, with new musicians, dance schools, and venues emerging both on the peripheries and in the center of the city. Much more than a dance, today's samba rock is a lifestyle and a worldview that combines the daily experiences of São Paulo's black *periferia* with the most modern and diverse elements from the global circuits.

#### The Photo Exhibit

The exhibit photos traveled to Austin directly from São Paulo. The creators of the images are a group of young photographers from a cultural collective called Samba Rock na Veia (SRNV). The SRNV emerged in 2007 as a simple blog published by a group of friends in an underprivileged area of São Paulo. In the first posts on the blog, the participants explored the significance of samba rock to their own identities and announced relevant events and venues around the city. By 2009, their following as well as SRNV's own team had grown enough to sustain a full-blown website and a broadened scope of activities, ranging from maintaining an active calendar of samba rock-related events and a constantly updated directory of musicians, venues, and dance lessons to gathering historical documents, holding interviews with representative figures, and producing audiovisual materials about the history, development, and cultural signifi-

cance of samba rock.

In addition to these activities, the team also began to provide journalistic coverage of a broad variety of samba rock events around the city. With grants from the city government, they were able to invest in the necessary equipment and training, producing complete photographic and journalistic coverage of three to six events per week. This intense coverage of events had an invigorating effect on the samba rock scene. Scattered across a metropolitan area of more than 20 million people, many practitioners had lost touch with the broader community, coming to believe that the scene had lost popularity and perhaps even disappeared. The broadcasting effort of SRNV has helped the population to perceive samba rock once again as a living, vibrant, and, most important, young culture.

Since 2010, the collective also has been passing on their skills and knowledge to other youth on the peripheries. By 2012, sixty-eight young apprentices had received hands-on training in techniques of photography, journalism, and video production, facilitating their entry into the professional job market in related areas. Currently, SRNV continues to develop the infrastructure of their website, while also exploring additional directions in São Paulo's cultural economy.

The photos included in the exhibition were a selection of thirty-two representative images taken by the SRNV photographers at a



broad variety of samba rock events between 2009 and 2011. While blending journalistic coverage with artistic expression, the photographers Júnior Calixto, Greice Gonçalves, Camila Reis, Clóvis Pereira, Semayat Oliveira, Claudia Souza, and Roberto Moreira sought to produce images that would portray first and foremost the diversity of the samba rock scene. Although sometimes considered only a style of dance and music, to those involved samba rock also entails elements of

Photo courtesy of Krista Kateneva.





Photo courtesy of Samba Rock na Veia.

material aesthetics, technology, fashion and beauty, literature and spoken word, political discourse, and at times an entire lifestyle. The images included in the exhibit portray musicians, both pioneers and current artists, competitive dance groups in performance, amateur couples with their arms interlocked in the middle of a spin, typical venues that welcome this population, the encounter of old and new technologies of sound reproduction, the finest clothing and visual aesthetic

that characterizes the practice, and the inclusion of participants from all walks of life, all levels of physical ability, and multiple forms of contributing to the scene.

Before arriving in Austin, the images already had been exhibited at Feira Preta, a fair showcasing Afro-Brazilian cultural economies that is held annually in São Paulo, and at various community centers around the city. After the event at UT, SRNV donated the exhibit to the Benson Latin

American Collection, where the images are now preserved and available for future consultation and research. The Benson also houses a small collection of audio recordings and a video documentary on the music that accompanies the samba rock scene in São Paulo today. 🌟

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